ELL Reader

Social Studies

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Helen Wills Moody:
America's Tennis Champion



by Martina Williams



Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Biography	• Tennis • Women Athletes • Championships	• Captions • Fact Box • Definitions	• Tennis Terms • The Suffix *-ship*

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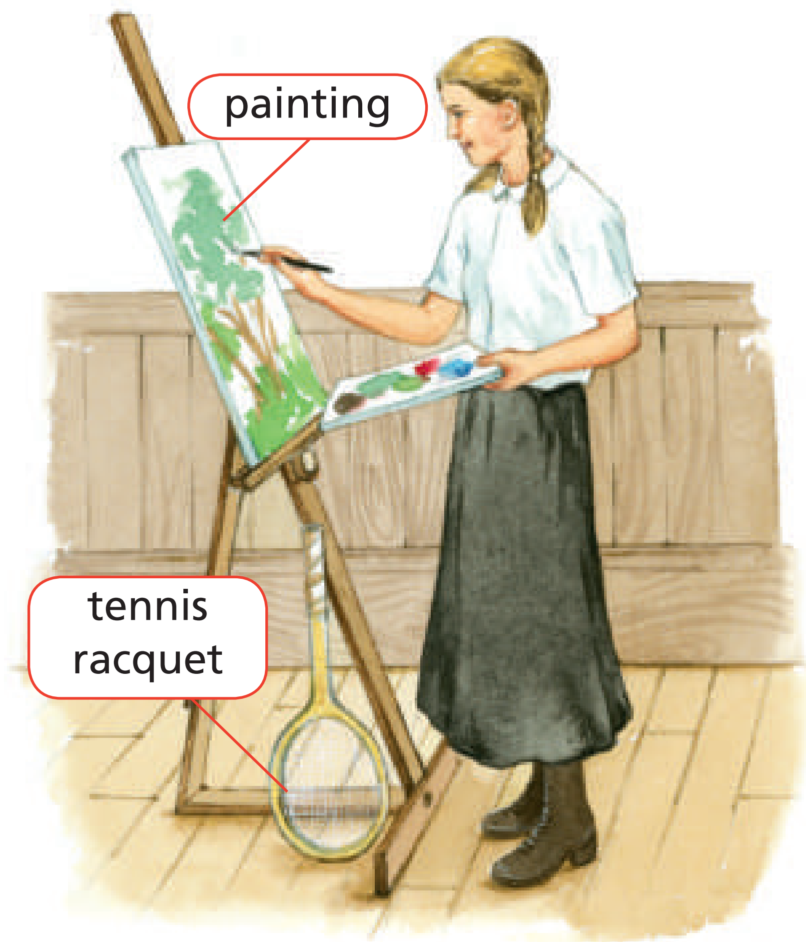
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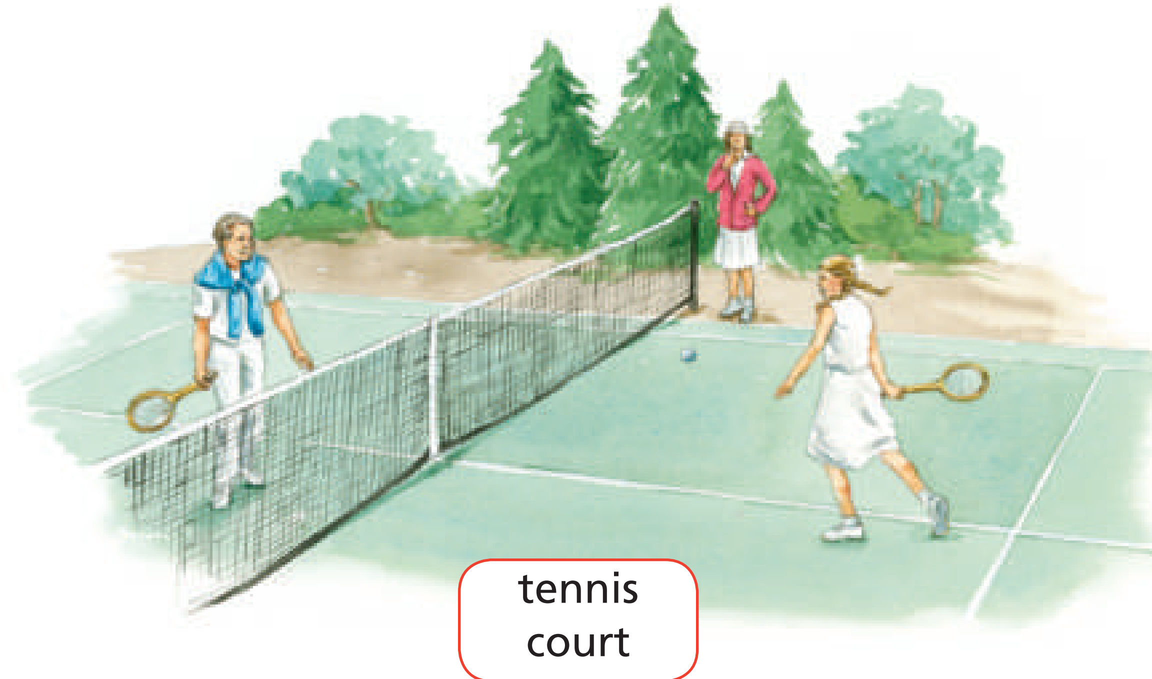


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Helen Wills loved to paint and play tennis.

Helen Wills was born in California in 1905. As a girl, Helen loved two activities: painting and tennis. She did both almost all her life. Helen Wills grew up to be a good painter. She sold her paintings in New York City. But painting isn't what made Helen famous. She grew up to become the most successful women's tennis champion of her time.



Helen played tennis almost every day with her father.

Helen's father was a doctor. His favorite thing to do was to play tennis with Helen, at a tennis club in Berkeley, California.

One day when Helen was 14, a famous tennis player named Hazel Wightman visited the club. She noticed a skinny 14-year-old girl in pigtails who was playing with her father. That girl was Helen Wills. Wightman later said she was surprised by Helen's concentration. Wightman thought that Helen had the makings of a champion.




 Helen Wills hits a back-hand shot.

 Helen hits a serve.



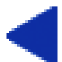
Hazel Wightman became Helen's coach. They played tennis together four days a week for hours at a time. Wightman worked on many different shots with Helen. She helped Helen develop a reliable backhand shot and a strong serve.

Tennis can be played one player against another player or as doubles, with two players on each side. Helen and Hazel were unbeatable as doubles partners. In 1921, Helen won the California State Women's Championship, at age 16.

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backhand: shot made with the back of the hand facing forward

serve: shot in tennis that puts the ball in play









Helen was famous for her power of concentration. Other tennis players would groan when they lost a point and celebrate when they won one. Not Helen.

To improve, she practiced against male players who were stronger and could hit the ball harder. Every year experts rank the best tennis players. In 1922, the 17-year-old was ranked the third best female tennis player in the United States.

Extend Language







Helen Wills Moody won the Wimbledon championship eight times.



In 1923, Wills made it to the United States Tennis Championships in Forest Hills, a part of New York City. She played against Molla Mallory. Who was Molla Mallory? She was rated the best player in the world.

At 18, Helen Wills was 13 years younger than Mallory. Experts expected Mallory to easily defeat the young Wills.

The experts were in for a surprise. Wills had no trouble with Mallory. The match was over so quickly that people were shocked. Most tennis matches last one or two hours. Wills beat Mallory in 33 minutes!



Helen's victory over Mallory was the beginning of her becoming the tennis champion of the world. In the next few years, Helen won almost every match she played. In 1924, she won the gold medal for tennis at the Olympics. From 1927 to 1933, Helen won 180 matches in a row without ever losing. Sports fans considered her the best woman tennis player who had ever played. In 1928, she married Frederick Moody and changed her name to Helen Wills Moody.

Helen Wills Moody's Major Tennis Championships

Tournament	Years Won
Wimbledon Championship	1927 1928 1929 1930 1932 1933 1935 1938
U.S. Championship	1923 1924 1925 1927 1928 1929 1931
French Championship	1923 1929 1930 1932





Helen changed tennis fashion.



Helen did more than win championships. She also changed tennis fashion. In the 1920s, women played in heavy skirts that went down to their ankles. These skirts made it hard to run and move around the tennis court. Helen decided to play in a light skirt that reached her knees, and other players followed her.

In 1938, Helen Wills Moody was 33 years old. After winning that year at Wimbledon, she decided to retire. People everywhere felt that she was the best woman tennis player of her time. In 1969, she was elected to the Tennis Hall of Fame.





Talk About It

1. How did Helen practice to become a better player?
2. Tell some of the details in the story that help prove how good a tennis player Helen became.

Write About It

3. On a separate sheet of paper, write three facts and two opinions about Helen Wills Moody that you read in this story.

Extend Language

The words *friend* and *friendship* are related. *Friendship* is shared by *friends*.

What is the word in this story that is related to the word *champion*?

Illustrations: 2–3 Meg Aubrey.

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